Roy Matsuzaki

Roy Matsuzaki inside the barrack room replica at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose

> “During that time things happened. Somebody shot a rifle, a shotgun, through our front bedroom door. At the time we weren’t sleeping, but my brother and I were sleeping in that room and we vacated after. So you know, people were after us.”

San Jose resident Roy Matsuzaki has the warm and colorful personality fit for a museum docent. As a volunteer at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose for 15 years, he is living history, sharing his experience as a survivor of the incarceration in Jerome and Rohwer, the two camps in Arkansas. Originally from the Sacramento countryside, the Matsuzaki family was reeling from the aftermath of the Depression when the war broke out — Roy remembers his parents being in debt even to the grocery store. “Coming from a poor family, we ate morning, noon and night, rice. Bread was a luxury, believe me. I mean, I never had the luxury of butter, milk and bread when I was a child.” For all its injustices and exertion of racial prejudice, Roy believes the fact the government fed the family in camp helped his parents out significantly, even allowing his father’s debt to the grocery store be forgiven when they were released.

Within his family of eight children, Roy was one of the youngest, busying himself with sports while in Jerome and Rohwer, particularly baseball. But coming home for the Matsuzukis was a difficult struggle, as Roy recalls the hostile environment waiting for them back in Sacramento. “They used derogatory names, that was pretty common. I mean it was terrible, calling us these names. We couldn’t buy a home, couldn’t go to a restaurant,

couldn’t get a job. Teachers wouldn't back you up, you know.”

Today, Roy is happily retired and married, with two daughters and four grandchildren, with one grandson who took a special interest in learning and writing about his grandfather’s experience. “I’m proud of my grandchildren,” he says.

Roy can you start off with where were you born and can you describe your family?

I come from a family of five sisters and three brothers. And of course my mother and father, they came from Fukui, Japan. They immigrated and came here in about 1920 to San Francisco. And from San Francisco they went to Sacramento county and they became farmers. I was born in a little town called Florin. It’s out in the country and I grew up there before the war days and then I was evacuated from Florin, Elk Grove.

Can you describe what a typical day was like for you before the war?

I was still a youngster before the war. Every Friday night we would go see movies, a Japanese movie. In a little town called Florin. This is where my mother and father took me. This is how I got interested in the samurai warriors, so after we came back from the movies we would play sword fights with the kids. So for my family it was typically working on the farms. And things like that.

And you were living in a mostly Japanese community?

Well there was sort of a Japanese community – the property all along there were Japanese. Somehow, we all bought property or we leased property there and we were all able to communicate together. But when we came back it was all gone.

Do you remember the day of Pearl Harbor?

Yes, I think I was nine or ten years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked. My brother was in the United States Army. And he was visiting us at the time and we had a radio going on and over the radio it says that Pearl Harbor was attacked. And also that all the military men will be subject to coming back to the camp. So he had to go back to the military. I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was.

Do you remember what your brother's response was?

No. My brother didn't respond but my mother and father says, "*Gee, nihon to amerika mo senso hajimeta*." That means that Japan had started the war. So they knew that it was coming on. But after the announcement, I guess everybody went into hiding.

Were your parents afraid that they were going to be targeted or be watched?

Well no, they weren't. But they knew there was a lot of stuff against us, you know. During that time things happened. Somebody shot a rifle, a shotgun, through our front bedroom door. At the time we weren't sleeping, but my brother and I were sleeping in that room and we vacated after. But the BBs, it landed at the half of the window. It didn't take the whole window. But that was a terrible thing. So you know, people were after us. I mean, they didn't want us around. They made acquisitions and threats and things like that. So I couldn't believe those things were happening. Maybe it was the best thing that they sent us into the camp, to protect us.

You feel like maybe something would have happened?

Right. You never know what American people would do to us. I mean, they froze our assets, they froze our bank account, they restricted us to five miles traveling time and things like that. They made sure we wouldn't be an asset to Japan. They made sure we pulled our shades down [on the trains] and it was terrible.

Did your parents talk to you at all about what they thought was happening?

Well they kind of knew something was going on. But they didn't exactly know they were going to be put into camp. But you know, they were kind of worried about what's going to happen. A lot of families changed locations from here to there, because they knew the government wouldn't touch this area so they kept moving inland. But then when 9066 was made executive, we all had to go. I mean it was a forced evacuation. To me, I didn't know what was going on, you know. But my mother took me to the department store and bought me some new clothes. I said, "Hey, this is pretty good!" I was wondering why she was buying me some new clothes. To take them along with us, you know.

Were your parents leasing the land and the home?

Well yeah. We had to sell just about everything we had. We were trying to get rid of our refrigerator, our washing machine, and whatever we had in the household and stuff like that. But you know, even my mother and my father heard the FBI are going to come. She had Emperor Hirohito's picture. I mean she came from Japan so she burnt that up. And she burnt a lot of the stuff she had from Japan up. My father he had a samurai sword. He buried it into the garage, he wasn't going to turn it in, you know. And I think my brother had a revolver. He buried that along with the sword. That way they won't be able to capture it but they were told to turn that in. But he was a hardhead. He wouldn't want to turn his sword in, you know. That was his prized possession. We weren't determined to ask anybody to look after our stuff, you know. I guess our family thought, "Hey, we won't be coming back." So we just bolted up our home and that was it, you know. And we just left it. But according to my sister, the property was a lease property.

I like that your father wasn't going to hand over his sword to the FBI. He would rather get rid of it. You know, if he can't have it, they can't have it.

Right. I didn't know that he buried it until we came back. We went back to our old house and he asked the owner if we could borrow a pick and shovel. He was willing to give it to my father – and I didn't know that he buried it. But it was all rusty anyway. You know. You couldn't use it. I mean he saved the saber of it. Because he used his sword to promote his teaching. He used to teach this Japanese sword dance called *kenbo*. I don't know if you've heard of that.

Wow. So he was an instructor, a teacher?

He was an instructor. So when he went to camp, he was an instructor in that sword dance. Of course he didn't have a sword, but they made a wooden sword and it's done with, do you know *shigin* singing? So he had something to do at camp while we were there.

Can you tell me what you remember about going to the assembly center and living there?

It wasn't a pleasing day. My sister had to drive us to the little town called Elk Grove where the train was waiting for us. We had a dog and unfortunately the dog followed us halfway to the stop. And we told him, "Go back!" And it was a sad thing to leave a dog. We don't know what happened to him after we left, you know. So my sister dropped us off, at the train station, and she took the car and left it at the garage. We don't know if she sold it or if she just left it there. I think she just left it there.

Besides, my father had to register us among the people going into the assembly center, and then after we registered, we had to board this train

with the military. And then we boarded this train to the Fresno assembly center. We were there for four months. I couldn't believe it because after the train ride, I boarded this bus. And we were driving into that gate. I saw the barbed wire fence. I said, “What the heck is this?” I couldn't believe it. In the nighttime they would check and see if we were all in the barracks. A head count, every 10 o’clock, someone would come making sure if you're still there.

Really? One of the guards would come around?

One of the guards. But when I looked outside I saw searchlights and guard towers. I couldn't believe it. It was a prison. I mean, we were locked up. For what reason, you know?

That must have been the moment that it hit you. That you knew, even as a child, something bad was happening.

Right. But to me, I couldn’t understand what was going on. I mean, they gave us the proper care. I mean they gave us shots because of disease and of course they took care of my teeth. I mean the government took care of the family. We weren’t threatened to do anything. I went to school, first time I had milk. I didn't have milk at home. You know those were precious stuff. And we didn't have bread. But then when I went to school they gave us cookies and milk I mean they took care of the children there. Fresno assembly center was just like a county fairground. It wasn't as bad as some of these racetracks, where they had horses and animals. The assembly center were nice and clean. I mean the floor was clean, the condition was pretty good. It wasn't as bad as these people who lived in horse stalls. I mean it was terrible, the smells there. We lived in nice barracks, you know.

So that was better for you. How about your siblings - where are you in the lineup of your siblings?

I’m next to last, among the eight. I have a younger sister, still living in Gilroy. And I have a sister in law a couple of years older, who lives in Sacramento. So there's only three of us left. All of my sisters and my brothers have passed away. I mean, they ran into sickness or ill health or

something like that. I'm still surviving, I'm in my 80s. I mean, you know, I was nine or ten years old. For statistics, I'm losing a lot of my friends. My father passed away when he was 62. My mother was 64. So they weren't able to see us grow up into adulthoods.

Do you think the stress of camp and what happened to your parents, do you think that played a role?

I'm sure a lot of that was blamed on the internment part. To me, it didn't affect me. The internment was something I learned about and something I knew that happened. And I just wanted to forget about it. My mother and my father never told about it. They said it's in the past.

Did you ever ask them, when you got a little older?

Original WRA caption: Rohwer Relocation Center, McGehee, Arkansas. Barrack scene at Rohwer Relocation Center. Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration

Well, yes and no. You know, I waited to ask them because I knew how they went through it. I knew the problem that existed. I know what they went through. And I knew what was the cause of it. My mother used to say when she was at camp, "Well, this is pretty good!" They give you a roof over your head, they fed you three meals a day. And even paid her. I mean, you can't beat that! We entered the camp right after the Depression. And coming from a poor family, we ate morning, noon and night, rice. Bread was a luxury, believe me. I mean, I never had the luxury of butter, milk and bread when I was a child. I think I ate rice morning, noon and night. And most of the stuff came from our farm. So it wasn't exactly what we were looking forward to but

hey, going into a camp and being treated like this was exceptional. Something different. I mean, my mother and father couldn't believe it, you know? I mean, he was fed. Well he was an alcoholic but when he went into camp. He got sober for four years, believe me. But when he came out, he was right back on. That's what killed him. He was an alcoholic, you know.

But I knew my parents were going through, you know. The only thing I can tell you what the benefit was for my mother and father was that my father always wanted to borrow money from the company where he provided strawberries and my mother would go to the grocery store and signed up for groceries. I mean she didn't have the money. So she had to go grocery store to purchase. Well, when we came back, the owner of the grocery store brought out his books and says, "I need to be paid back." And my father's company wanted to be paid back. But did you know, they couldn't touch us, because the statute of limitation ran out? You cannot collect anything from these evacuees. Hey, we went in with nothing, we came out with nothing. So how are you going to be able to collect money from them? So, that was the only thing that was a plus for my mother and my father. We were able to write off our debt.

They got lucky in that way.

They got lucky in that way. But trying to find a home and trying to find a place was difficult.

So let's transition to you going to Jerome first. What happened when you left Fresno and went to Jerome?

Gee, when I went out of Fresno, I thought this was one of the exciting things of my life. You know, we got to ride the train for four days and four nights. And I was able to see the whole countryside. You know this is great. You know, I never saw the United States. But we stopped at New Mexico. And the guards let us out, to stretch our legs. And the people from New Mexico asked us, "What tribe are you from?" They thought we were Indians. You know, high cheekbones. They probably thought we were Indians being transferred across the United States. I mean, believe me, that's what they

asked us, because they thought we were Indians.

But going from Fresno to Jerome was long days. I mean, I don't know if I took a shower or took a bath but it was four days and four nights. When we hit Jerome, I couldn't believe it. Across, all these barracks! So we were able to choose one barracks and from there we picked our barracks, I mean they picked our barracks for us and so we moved in. And when we moved in, it was home for us for a while. For another year and a half until they closed Jerome up. And in Jerome, I got to hunt fireflies. As a kid, you know, catching things. And Jerome had chiggers [tick-like insects] and so they would get into your socks and bite.

And we went into the forest to hunt for pine nuts. There was a lot of things to do in camp, you know. And that was one place, when we went to camp, where I was able to go to church every Sunday. And I never missed church. You know, I was a Buddhist and my mother said you go to church with all these kids. So every Sunday I went to church. And I used to hear good sermons, you know. I think that's what made me become a good Buddhist.

Then we had schools, you know. I couldn't believe – when we went to school – we had to pledge allegiance to the flag! Of all the things! And we sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee." And had a flag in school. You know we were in Jerome, without a country. Really, I didn't have a country. But then they made sure we would recite, "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands…" I really could remember and singing, "My country, 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty…" And justice for all! Those were the words. For justice. But I can't believe the government did this to us. You know, I can't describe words, adjectives of what happened to us. Would you have gone to a far away place that they take you over there and you have to leave?

I wouldn't, no.

"Then we had schools, you know. I couldn't

believe – when we went to school – we had to pledge allegiance to the flag! Of all the things! And we sang “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” And had a flag in school. You know we were in Jerome, without a country. Really, I didn’t have a country. ”

No! You wouldn't have gone. But we were forced. We had no choice. I mean the politicians, the people here, they wanted the Japanese out of here.

And Roy can you talk about how it was more than just the racial tension, right? There were other factors.

Oh yeah. A lot of factors. You know, the Attorney General of California was Chief Justice Earl Warren. He became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He was running for Attorney General. He influenced the people here to get the Japanese out of here because he was running for office. Would you believe that influenced them? Plus the General of the Army here and the Secretary of War plus Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the President, was influenced by these people from California. I don’t think Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew the Constitution. I mean the whole Constitution was a formality. But then, I think some of the writers there was trying to question Chief Justice Earl Warren. What was the reason behind it? And he would never admit he was wrong.

You know he was here running for Attorney General but he became one of the best Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and they said he was definitely good. But he would never explain what he said about the Japanese here that was evacuated to camp. I mean that was his gradual assumption of providing the interns here in California. I mean, like I said, they didn’t want us here. The business people, the politicians, they wanted us out of here. It was terrifying.

Did your parents work in camp?

Yeah, my mother was hired as a waitress in one of the mess halls. So she got paid, I think like 12 dollars a month to serve, to work in a mess hall to either, wash dishes or do things, to cook. And my father was hired as a foreman and taking the people out to the vegetables. We grew vegetables in the camp. So he was a farmer because of his background. So he was at work, that's the type of work he did. But as far as amusement, he was like a dance instructor and he conducted classes for people in camp. The adults had nothing else to do. Just to go to these events, singing, painting or whatever they could do. So a lot of the adults kept busy.

But the barracks were inconvenient for women. They didn't have a place to go, they had to do it in a little bucket, you know. And to go to take a shower and things like that. It was inconvenient for women, you know. Men could take a shower in the open shower. But women would like to have a partition. It wasn't easy for my sisters. They would wait until graveyard to take a shower.

And continuing with your family, can you explain a little bit about how your sister married somebody who served in the 442nd?

Well my sister, all the gals in camp who had sisters, would entertain these soldiers from nearby Camp Shelby. Because at Camp Shelby, the USO wouldn't serve the Nisei Japanese soldiers. The prejudice. USO was supposed to be the United States Organizations, it should take care of servicemen but they said, "We will not service the Japanese American servicemen." So they bused these soldiers to Jerome and Rohwer where they were allowed to be entertained by my sisters. They took pictures with these soldiers and they would come to my sisters' room, you know. But I would go in there and they would say, "Here's a quarter. Go see a movie." [*laughs*] They didn't want me around.

Rohwer Block 7 residents (all were primarily from Los Angeles), including two 442nd RCT soldiers visiting from Camp Shelby (top row, seventh and eighth from left). Roy's whole family is also in this photo. Date: April 15, 1944

But after we went to Rohwer in 1944, the government allowed some of the adults to go into cities like Chicago, Minneapolis and Cleveland. You could go from the camp. So my sister went in Minneapolis, where they had the MIS: Military Intelligence Service. They were all going to school. And a lot of the 442nd was stationed there. So she met this soldier and she got married. And of course he came to visit us and at camp. We were proud of seeing him, in his U.S. uniform and all that. But my brother, he was stationed at Camp Crowder in Missouri and he met a white woman and he got married to her.

And my mother said, "Don't bring her into camp. I'd be embarrassed." So he didn't bring her into camp. But he was able to visit us. But she was harassed, they had their first son. She was called names and stuff like that. And she's still living, she's still in Sacramento. There were restrictions when we were in camp. We didn't want no mixed marriage. But after that, a lot of the GIs that was in Germany and they had mixed marriages and brought home wives so that became pretty good. But in camp I never saw

any prejudice going on, you know.

But then we went to Rohwer because Jerome had to close down – I guess you know why Jerome had to close down.

Do you want to say why?

Yeah, because they gave us this loyalty questionnaire – the adults. My mother and father wanted to go back to Japan. Because they said, "Hey, I got no country. I want to go back." But my sisters said no way. We had our brothers still here so we didn't, my brother and my mother and my sister said yes/yes. And my father said no/no, you know, the questionnaire. "Would you be, would you be willing to serve in or will you serve or willing to be faithful to Japan or the United States?" But my sister said, "Sign the questionnaire that you are faithful to the United States." So I am glad we stayed there!

But half of the people from Jerome said no/no. So they went to Tule Lake. It was another camp where they had to go back to Japan. But we stayed in Jerome. But they said they have to close Jerome down because that was empty. They had to bring in German prisoners into Jerome. So we got on this the Army 4x4 and went from Jerome to Rohwer, which is 35 miles apart. So they welcomed us into Jerome. But in Jerome, it was a different situation with a lot of Los Angeles people and they were tough, ornery people. I mean, the L.A. people didn't like us.

Really?

Oh yeah. I was beat up and had a lot of fights. And, I finally had to join the school, with the LA kids. I mean, I had no choice. But anyway, when I was in Jerome, my mother says she wants these kids to stop picking on me. So she signed me up for judo school, which was nice. I took up judo at school and I gave the sensei 25 cents a week. Of course learning judo helped me out so I was able to protect myself. So nobody was able to pick on me anymore which I was thankful for. So these guys would never mess around with me.

You know, I had a hard time getting along with the kids. But when I went to

school, even school was kind of rough, you know. But then in Rohwer, toward the end of the camp days, we were allowed to visit little town of McGehee. That was interesting to me. We took a bus from Rohwer to McGehee and the lady that told us, she says, “You fellows can sit in the front.” I didn’t understand that. And we had the Blacks in the back. I couldn’t understand that until I came home. They had separate latrine, separate grocery stores, separate movie house. And I didn’t understand that! They were more mistreated than we were. I mean the war was still going on. And I couldn’t understand that until I came home.

The Matsuzaki family in Rohwer

But leaving Rohwer was very exciting. I mean that was after the atomic, the Hiroshima/Nagasaki. And after that bomb, I finally realized - what the heck were we in camp for? I mean, they are going to release us. Releasing us, they gave us each 20 dollars a piece to eat on the way home. Well on the way home, believe me, we stopped at Texas, I almost got left behind. The train stopped and they told us you can stretch your legs out so I walked, to this little ice cream shop, it was about two blocks away, and I heard this whistle go *whoo-whoo!* And I was one block, and I ran and I finally caught the train and I really got on. My father told me, “Can't you wait ‘til you’re home?” You know, I could’ve been left in Texas. That was a funny experience.

Can you talk about coming out of camp when the war ended? How was the resettlement for your family?

Oh yeah. Coming out of camp was disastrous. I mean, we didn’t have a home, we didn’t have a place to stay. So when we left Arkansas, they knew who would have to be sent to these stations. Well, we were sent to Sacramento to an army base. The army base had barracks, just like the

barracks we lived in. So we lived in those for about six months. They provided us with the room and things like that, to take a shower, a bath. And they provided us with the kitchen. But they didn't provide us with the food. We had to go purchase our own food to feed ourselves. So we were there for six months until some family got us out and they said they had this extra home to put us up. So we stayed there until we found a temporary home with our friends. And we stayed there for a while until we were able to move over here. You know, we had to give up the strawberry farm and my father passed away. So my mother and my brother had to move to Gilroy where they had sharecropping, so this is how we were able to make a living.

So you moved down to Gilroy?

Well my sister and my brother, they moved to Gilroy to sharecrop. I stayed back in Sacramento. But did you know, at 19 I got a draft notice? This was during the Korean War! I couldn't evade draft like these soldiers. But I was patriotic, I got drafted into the United States Army. I could say, 'Hey! I don't want to be drafted.' But I got drafted and I served my two years with the Korean War. The war was going on but peace was signed about the 12 month from my basic training. Was I happy!

When you came back and had to start your life over, did you find that it was welcoming, to use that word? Or was there prejudice?

No, it wasn't too easy coming back, you know. Kids would make fun of you, call you names and stuff like that. And we would go to grocery stores and they wouldn't serve you. Things like that. I tried to get a haircut in Elk Grove and the guy said, "Get the heck out of here!" So I had to go to Florin, which was where I was able to get a haircut. I mean, those were the things going on. You couldn't travel around. But when we had to give up our land here in Florin to go to Gilroy it was a different situation because they gave us a home and we sharecropped. And that's how we made a living. My sister was able to enjoy Gilroy and she got married to some fella, so it was a good move. She didn't want to leave high school to come to Gilroy, she had to leave us. But I didn't want to stay in Sacramento myself, so I moved here to San Jose. This is why I am here.

I was going to ask - so how did you settle in San Jose?

Well, I was working for an Air Force Base in Sacramento. During the time, I left the service and I heard you could get the GI Bill. You know, they would pay for my education. So, that's why I moved here to go to school on the GI Bill. And this is how I came here. But that's how I established myself. I got a job here at Hewlett Packard. And then I joined this organization, and here I am.

And how many years have you been volunteering with the museum?

I have been here about 15 years. I moved here from the old place, the old JACL building to this building here. And I stayed with JAMsj. I thought, you know, I could help them out. I'm not a permanent fixture but I enjoy coming here and talking to people and describing what I did and things like that.

"That redress came too late. My mother and father could have used it. They were the ones who needed it. "

As a docent and volunteer, and you see a lot of people come through here. Is there anything that surprises people the most about what happened during the war?

I guess when people come here, they like to hear your story. Then they ask you questions, which is good questions, you know. Things that I never think about. And so I take them to through the room and tell them what I did, or where I went, what we did. And sometimes they cry – they don't believe these things happened, you know. I won't tell them the good things of what I did, you know. Of course, I did a lot of nice things in camp, you know. But I tell them going to camp was a real experience because you know, I learned

how to cope with people. I never saw so many Japanese. But then I got along with the kids. They treated me pretty good. Like I told you, I was able to go to church every Sunday. And I got to see a movie. Every Friday we would go to this auditorium and see movies about Dorothy Lamour and Bing Crosby, Bob Hope.

The sad things that happened [were] when the military officers had to come in and say to the mother and father, "Hey, a medal your son deserved." I mean if they were killed in action that was a sad thing. I got to hear those things. I got to see those things, you know. I was hoping too, my brother, I hope he comes back alive, you know. He made it back. But one of his friends didn't come back. But those were the sad things that happened at camp. The adults would tell us ghost stories at night. Boy, they knew a lot of ghost stories to tell us.

I have a question about receiving redress. I want to know your feelings about that.

Good question. That redress came too late. My mother and father could have used it. They were the ones who needed it. So after he passed away, maybe ten years later, they gave it to the children or any survivor.

To me, I didn't need it, but it helped, yeah, because my two daughters were going to college. So it helped me out. But now $20,000 dollars is nothing. But it helped us out, you know. I kept a copy of it, and kept it in my records and stuff. But the redress was too late. Wasn't enough. My father-in-law went to buy an Oldsmobile for $23,000. [*laughs*] You know, if they wouldn't give us the

money that was equivalent back in 1940. The $20,000 in 1940 would have been a lot of money. But in 1989 it was nothing. A lot of people accepted it, some people didn't want it. They said, you know, take it back. But I accepted it graciously.

But it is true that the people who needed it - a lot of people expressed that their parents, who really suffered that economic loss, they were already gone by the time.

Have you heard that often? Yeah, I mean, my father, of course he was broke when he came home. And you know, let me tell you, the Red Cross really did us a favor. I remember my father going up to Red Cross, and my father says, "Hey, I have no work. I just came back from a camp I want to feed my family." So the Red Cross helped my father, every time he went up, they gave him some money to feed my family, feed us. I mean, he had no work, just got out of camp. And, you know, he had to support us. So, the Red Cross did our family a great deed. Our house burned and the Red Cross came out and supported us with furniture and food and stuff. So lately, the last 20 years I donate to the Red Cross. Whenever, you know. And I donated my car to the Red Cross.

Is there anything else you'd like to add to your story, Roy?

Coming here. I appreciate you talking to me. It brings back a lot of memories. It's a sad thing that went on.

California State Library
FOUNDED 1850
PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE, SHAPING OUR FUTURE

This interview was made possible by the Japanese American Museum of San Jose and a grant from the California Civil Liberties Program.